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## An unnecessary energy shot

By Elia Leibowitz

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The news broke this week that the cabinet has authorized a national plan to reverse Israeli brain drain, at a cost of NIS 1.3 billion. The plan includes setting up 30 university excellence centers, focusing on predefined fields of research and recruiting top Israeli researchers from both outside and inside the country. Education Minister Gideon Sa'ar described the plan as an "energy shot to the higher education system and research in Israel."

There are good grounds to doubt Sa'ar's interpretation and offer one based on the fact that far cheaper and more effective energy would be achieved simply by increasing research budgets and creating more jobs in Israel's existing research universities. Evidence supporting the alternative interpretation can be found in the cabinet's plan, which does not give university academics any form of supervision over the proposed centers.

In November 1996, Ari Shavit conducted a long interview in Haaretz with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said that in Israel "we have academic and media institutions that are committed to uniform thinking, to the prevailing 'unithinking,' and they simply replicate themselves, producing more and more generations of young people with the same monochromatic line of thought." Netanyahu vowed that "I

intend to change this. I intend to help form a fund ... that would set up a string of institutions that would not be under the government's control but would create a genuine competition of ideas in Israel .... They would provide some kind of answer to the superficial, standard way of thinking, some kind of correction to the current monopolar condition of Israel's cultural reality."

Even students with mediocre verbal skills would easily understand that this "uniform thinking" in academic institutions that Netanyahu mentioned is merely opposition to the government's policies, as well as critical statements and articles about his decisions as prime minister. People in academia did indeed sometimes voice or write such things. After reading that interview, any child would realize that a more fitting interpretation of the cabinet's decision is as follows: The decision is merely another step in a long line of steps by cabinets headed by the same prime minister toward realizing his vision of "answering the superficial, standard way of thinking."

The prime minister's associates would do well to bring to his attention that the NIS 1.3 billion investment is completely unnecessary at present. It's true that in many countries academics and university students represent a hub of political

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and social agitation, and in many cases opposition to the government. This is the situation in Iran, communist China, Tibet and Argentina, and at critical times also in France, Germany and the United States. To a certain extent, Israeli universities were like that as well when remnants of political, social, independent and rational thought still inhabited their corridors, back in the days of the first Netanyahu cabinet.

Perhaps someone should explain to the prime minister that he was mistaken back then when he said academic institutions "simply replicate themselves." If there ever was "uniform thinking" in academic institutions of which he did not approve, it has since completed a 180-degree turn. Maybe some embers of that spirit of free thought are still to be found in Israeli universities, but the prime minister can relax. "Israel's cultural reality" has almost completely shifted in the direction he favors. There is no need now to invest NIS 1.3 billion in rendering a dying breed extinct

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